



Human Nature and World Democracy

Author(s): Frank H. Knight

Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (Mar., 1944), pp. 408-420

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2770477>

Accessed: 11/02/2015 15:17

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Sociology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

HUMAN NATURE AND WORLD DEMOCRACY

FRANK H. KNIGHT

ABSTRACT

Human nature is a manifold paradox. Man is a social animal, in the sense of "conventional," with anti-social traits equally prominent. Intelligent morality is a product of social evolution, partly uniform or convergent, partly the opposite of both. Custom, authority, and deliberate consensus are three distinguishable "stages" above instinctive animal society; the last is peculiar to recent western European civilization. Our individualistic, free, or democratic social ethic is largely limited to states by the facts of cultural and political differentiation. The place of conflicting economic interests in international war is highly ambiguous. The common idea of deliberately changing human nature is a tissue of logical confusion. The changes necessary to eliminate war without destroying freedom are largely undesirable, since war arises from conflicts between ideals and rights rather than mere interests. A peaceable and free world order calls for a combination of agreement and toleration, and both have ethical limits. The visible issues in war are relatively unimportant in comparison with the inherent clash between quantity and quality and between different qualities, in human life; and survival in a struggle for existence is, for the visible future, the final test of higher and lower. But some changes are clearly worth working for, while "we" defend our own cultural achievement.

I

To discuss this topic in the compass of a journal article we must limit our treatment closely to the practical problem. This means resisting the temptation to write a literary essay on human nature, which might bear such a title as "the low-down on human nature" or "the truth about human nature finally disclosed." The essential fact would be that human nature as we know it—the nature of man sufficiently advanced or civilized to think and talk about his own nature—is a tissue of paradox. It would be difficult to make any general statement about "man" which would not contain substantial truth; and this means that the antithesis of every statement, or, indeed, several antitheses, would also be partly true and, on the average, equally so.

The practical interest back of our discussion is a human aversion to war. This is partly because people do not like danger, suffering, and hardship; yet it is human nature to fight for interests of innumerable kinds and every degree of importance and for no interest except the fight. Man typically describes himself as the intelligent animal—*Homo sapiens*; but the main significance of this seems to be that man loves to compliment himself and considers this the highest compliment. "Intelligence" is a word of numerous meanings, and with respect to

all of them man is both a stupid animal and a romantic, preferring emotion to reason and fiction to truth. He is the laughing and the weeping animal, laughing most often at things obscene or cruel and weeping for pleasure at the sorrows of imaginary people.

Man also proverbially calls himself a social animal. He is social in a sense entirely different from other animals, a sense which involves antisocial qualities—a love of privacy, even solitude, and innumerable antipathies and conflicts of interest with his fellows in any social group. One of his social traits is exhibitionism; yet he is the only animal that has physical modesty and conceals his body in clothes; and what he does to his body is a tiny circumstance compared to his parading, concealment, and dissembling of his mind, his thoughts, and his feelings. For this function he is endowed with the marvelous faculty of speech. In his social life, again, man is a lawmaker and law-abider, one who loves ritual, formality, and rules for their own sake; yet he is also a lawbreaker, for many reasons and merely for the sake of nonconformity and defiance. He loves what is established because it is old, and he loves novelty because it is new, and change for the sake of change. Civilized man is a capricious and perverse animal. He typically has no clear idea what he wants or which of obviously incompatible things he

wants more. His acts often contradict his professed interests, which in turn are often contrary to any defensible notion of well-being. Even less, as this behavior proves, does he really believe what he says or thinks he believes. He progressively develops a repugnance for useful work and for any routine of settled, orderly life, preferring play, adventure, and excitement. He has a strong bent for fun, mischief, destruction, and cruelty, which is hardly found in any other species. (Animals are not "brutal" as the word is applied to man, i.e., cruel or lascivious; and "inhuman" behavior is as distinctive of man as "humane" acts.)

For our purpose here, the most important general truth about human nature is that man is a conventional animal—social in that sense. Of course, he is also unconventional; but this is true in the main in fields where it is conventional to be unconventional. Man is unique among animals in that he laughs at others but cannot endure being laughed at—except when he deliberately provokes laughter, which is one of his favorite sources of joy and pride. He cannot even stand it to be "looked at," except with looks of approval and admiration—though even less can he endure being avoided or ignored. Conventionality finds its extreme development in religion, a unique human interest. Yet people often welcome revolution, even in religion, and troop after the prophet of a new cult. One of the sharpest antitheses in human nature is the combination of the groveler and the power-seeker. But, on the whole, man is a conventional being, and this implies a preference for his own conventions over those of other groups. This bias, as we shall emphasize, is the primary root of war. But, even here, human nature is a paradox, since men also typically regard "foreign" people and ways and things as superior to their own; a prophet is not without honor save in his own country.

Another important fact in the study of war is that man is a discontented animal, and particularly that he is likely to grow more discontented as he becomes better off. But this is mainly because he is prone to

think someone else is getting the best of it or is putting something over on him. The conflict between different systems of conventionality or "culture," different customs, traditions, mores, on the one hand, and, on the other, increasing mass discontent as a direct consequence of an unprecedented increase in mass well-being in the last two centuries or so of our civilization are the two main causes of war which must be considered today in any thoughtful study of the problem of eliminating it.

With reference to our practical objective, it is necessary to have a clear orientation to the type of action which is contemplated. The objective is a world order which is not only peaceful but free, or democratic, and also preserves other values of our civilization. There is a vast difference in the meaning of intelligent action where the intention is to change human relations, in contrast with changing the behavior of nonhuman objects. In the latter case we can find out and apply laws of behavior which are not affected by our knowledge or intentions or attitudes, because the objects acted upon do not have reciprocal intentions or attitudes toward "us." With human beings the contrary is true. But within the human field itself there is another distinction, fully as important. If we wish merely to influence the overt behavior of other persons, it is theoretically possible to do this by coercion or persuasion—really a form of coercion and typically based upon deception. But, if we wish permanently satisfactory relations with others, this procedure is rarely effective, even in the narrow practical sense; and in the present context we assume it to be excluded by our ethical norms of satisfactory relationships. Even if it were possible to abolish war by making ourselves so strong that no one would dare to oppose our will, the result would not achieve our purpose.

Thus the problem is not one of the use of means, or power, to achieve a given concrete end. We should rather think of changing the rules of a game, so as to make it a better game. It makes all the difference in the world that the problem cannot be

treated simply as one of making others agree with us on ends and procedures by force or fraud or persuasion, but that agreement will involve mutual give and take. In a word, an essential feature of the problem is the presupposition of *democracy*; and it is necessary at the outset to recognize the historical uniqueness of this concept and its implications for human nature. Only in the past few centuries, and chiefly in the limited area of western Europe and its colonies, have men confronted this task or attempted to direct future history by intelligent mass action. Democracy is much more than a form of government. Its advent marks a transformation of man and of the meaning of a social problem. Entirely new ideals, of freedom and equality in place of status and authority, go with the revolutionary changes, dating chiefly from the seventeenth century, which established our free social order. Another unique ideal is that of progress, material and cultural. We must view human nature as active and self-changing and not merely as undergoing changes in response to outside activities or forces, and we must view social action as based on a rational consensus.

The essential fact is freedom, or creative activity. But freedom is like other traits of human nature in that it is created by a social situation or, in more technical terms, a complex of institutions. This also sets limits to freedom. The supreme paradox of man, in our civilization, is that he is an individual—unique, creative, and dynamic—yet is the creature of institutions which must be accounted for in terms of historical processes. Nothing could be more false historically than the notion that men are naturally free and equal, or even that they naturally have a right to freedom. In the light of history as a whole, the natural state of man is to live imbedded in a “crust of custom,” in which most of his activities, thoughts, and feelings are determined by established patterns. These are, or were, enforced upon him and also ingrained in his being, so that he hardly thought of departure from them and hence had little feeling of unfreedom. The exist-

ence of man as a free individual is a function of free society, which is the product of biological evolution and human culture history.

The familiar saying from Aristotle, that “man is a social animal,” is both true and misleading. That human beings can exist only in organized groups is true biologically and more strikingly true with respect to the traits which make us distinctively human. But the social life of man is different in principle from that of the animals, particularly those forms in which social organization is highly developed—the colonial insects. Man is social, but also naturally antisocial. His social organization always involves coercion, which he intrinsically dislikes. The capacity of coercing and being coerced is virtually peculiar to man, though we impute it in a certain degree to the “higher” animals, in domestication and in herd life. Men do not coerce the inert objects of nature and are not coerced by them, and the latter do not coerce one another. Furthermore, man’s love of freedom and hatred of coercion inherently involve a craving for *power*, not merely over the objects of nature but over other men—an antisocial trait. Power is a factor or dimension in effective freedom; no clear separation can be made between “freedom from” coercion—of custom or authority—and “freedom to” act, which presupposes power. But men desire freedom and power in the abstract, as well as for the sake of any particular use which they wish to make of either. They also claim freedom and power as a moral right, against other individuals and the various social groups in which they live. And within some limits everyone admits the validity of this claim on the part of others; but their claims to freedom and power overlap, creating conflicts of interest, which are the basis of social problems. Such features seem to be entirely absent from insect society. There the biological unit is not an individual, in the human meaning. It is not motivated by interests or rights which conflict with those of others or of the group.

Human intelligence, in the primitive instrumental meaning—the use of means to

realize ends—recognizes the value and necessity of group life, first, in the aspect of co-operation. But it also involves a tendency of the individual to use the fellow-members of his group for his own purposes or to try to make the terms of co-operation favorable to himself. In addition, man is endowed with a craving for “sociability,” in other forms than co-operation, which have no clear biological function; and these forms also involve both harmony and conflict of interest. A typical sociability interest is that of competitive social play—and most play is social and competitive. Here the immediate object of the individual is to win, to defeat the opponent, individual or group; but the game itself is a common interest of all the players. Very early in the history (prehistory) of civilized life, men developed a third type of social interest, the pursuit of “culture,” meaning intellectual and aesthetic activity, in contrast with the economic and recreative. This “higher life” partakes of the nature of both “work,” or co-operation, and play.

The “higher-culture” interests of man present a challenge to the student. They cannot be explained in terms of biological utility but are largely peculiar to man as a civilized being. From a natural point of view it is difficult to account for the development of the appreciation of beauty or a sense of humor or for speculative curiosity or the feeling of decency or that formal purity which is probably the ultimate root of the moral sense. It would seem that the civilized traits, taken en bloc, must somehow be useful, since the more civilized groups survive and increase at the expense of the less civilized—though again in the long course of history a high civilization seems to have been rather typically self-destructive.

From our point of view these interests are the heart of the problem, because among civilized peoples it is chiefly the right to civilized life, defined in terms of a particular civilization, which is at stake in war. The cultural amenities come to be regarded as “rights” by those who have them and by

those who want them, and it is for such rights that men are most likely to fight. They do not, in general, fight for any mere “interest” and are likely to be generous and self-sacrificing in the face of disaster, as when a ship is sinking or even in a food shortage, giving up the basic right to comfort, security, or life itself. To say this is not necessarily to exalt the moral nature of man; for, on the one hand, the features of a culture for which men will fight are not necessarily good, even in terms of their own recognized standards. And, on the other hand, an important trait of human nature is the disposition to regard as a right practically anything which is intensely desired, and that largely irrespective of whether the individual regards the object as really important.

Human nature is a function of the nature of society, and both are historical products. Knowledge of the course of evolution of man and of civilization would be infinitely valuable for the interpretation of human nature and for dealing with human problems, but little information about it is to be had. It is worth noting that man did not evolve from social forms, such as the insects, in which the patterns of individual and group life are instinctive, but from species of a totally different biological type. At an early stage, these lived individual lives, except for mating; then followed longer and longer association for rearing the young; later they gradually formed loose larger groupings of the “herd” type, apparently a “harem,” or extreme patriarchy. The mammalian herd as we know it presents a mixture of instinct, custom (imitation and habit), and authority or dominance. Its psychological basis seems to be emotional rather than rational, as is undoubtedly true also of human society. The development of the herd was apparently connected with important physiological changes in the sex life, fairly complete in the anthropoids, while the romanticizing of sex and family relations is one of the most distinctive traits of *Homo*. From the anthropoid herd to human society the

great change is, of course, the development of speech, along with the brain capacities and mental dispositions, both rational and emotional, which are associated with articulate communication.

With reference to the course of development at the human level—though again only the most recent history is at all well known—we can discern some of the great changes through which advanced civilized man and society have become what they are and which help us to understand our situation and its problems. In “primitive” human society the most important principle of order is *custom*, as we have already noted. It is always associated with an elaborate tradition, a mythology suffused with “religious” ideas. The patterns of action and the traditions are transmitted by social inheritance through imitation and habituation, accompanied by some active “teaching” on the part of the mature generation and learning on the part of the young. The process of unconscious acculturation differs from biological inheritance of instinct, but it is equally mechanical, conservative, and opposed to individual freedom. Authority is also conspicuous in tribal society; but mostly it is not “real” authority, since those who exercise it get their position through inheritance in accord with sacred custom and tradition, of which they are the custodians, with their activities prescribed; and in this role they are viewed as the agents of supernatural powers. Their authority, or that of the traditions they enforce, is supported by the group as a whole, against recalcitrant individuals, though deliberate breach of custom is relatively rare. Thus the primary phenomenon is that of “culture” in the anthropological meaning, or of law as usage “sanctioned” by public opinion and religion.

In a summary view modern free or democratic society may be viewed as the product of an evolution from tribal life, involving two great stages of advance. First, “civilization,” in our meaning, seems always to have developed out of barbarism under an authoritarian organization, a monarchy associated with a nobility and a priesthood.

(Various forms of agricultural village and “city-state” doubtless mark the transition from tribal life to a kingdom or empire covering a wide area and including numerous “cities.”) From the standpoint of the development of individual freedom, the transition from tribal life to monarchy is rather a step backward (except for the rulers), since “government by law” is replaced in part by “government by men.” But it made possible a vast increase in power in all spheres and a great advance in “culture,” the higher life, though only for a small élite.

The second step giving rise to free society, akin to modern democracy or accepting similar ideals and combined with a high civilization, has resulted from a revolutionary overthrow of despotism, autocracy or oligarchy, and “priestocracy.” A democratic order may or may not preserve its culture, inherited from the preceding stage, or develop it further over a substantial historical period. It will be seen that this three-stage scheme is obtained by intercalating an intermediate stage of authoritarian society between “status” and “contract,” in Sir H. S. Maine’s well-known formula for the evolution of law. In juridical terms our first stage is that of customary law, including the authority and procedures for enforcement; the second stage sees the advent of a “state,” with rulers exercising a greater range of real or arbitrary power to make law, in addition to enforcing law; the third stage is that of democratic legislation, expressing a more or less rational general will, social consensus, or public opinion.

Without ranging over world history, we may think of the past thousand years or so of European civilization. Conditions in northern and western Europe at this “beginning” may be regarded as practically those of barbarism, under customary law. The religious sanction was Christianity, in the form in which it had become established in the period of decadence of classical civilization. The later evolution was, of course, profoundly influenced by survivals of the older culture and especially by the “transit

of civilization" from the East (including the Moslem world), where it survived in much greater degree, to backward regions with "frontier" conditions. The political transition occurred in northern Europe and is rather indirectly related to the cultural "Renaissance" in the Italian city-states. (Even the latter was at least as much a unique new growth as a "rebirth.") The political movement manifests the two revolutionary changes mentioned: (a) the development of autocratic states in the Renaissance period and (b) liberalization and democratization in the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

II

We come back to the point stressed early in the article—the historical uniqueness of the present social and political situation and its accepted ideals. What is referred to as democracy anywhere else in the panorama of history—in tribal life or in city-states or in the Middle Ages—was not democratic in anything like our equalitarian meaning of the term but was largely based on customary law, which presupposed class distinctions and status relations. It also existed only on a minute scale, in comparison with modern states; and where it was associated with a high "civilization," especially in classical Greece, it was very short lived, running into tyranny at home and then into absorption by an imperial order. (These facts inevitably call to mind analogous tendencies in our contemporary world of western European civilization.)

Our modern social ethic is individualistic. Based on the ideals of freedom, equality, and progress, it repudiates the authority of custom and of individuals as political or religious rulers. It regards "society" as a free association of juridically equal individuals, for the pursuit of ends and ideals which are individual or freely chosen. Laws are viewed as rules, made or accepted by all, governing the association of individuals and voluntary groups. Groups are formed at will in response to any common interest of their members; even the state is viewed as

ideally based on free association or "contract." Ideally, groups within the state exercise no coercive power over their members, and the state itself has a minimum of such power. The purposes or interests for which men form organized and more or less permanent groups within the state and across state boundaries (and states, in the liberal conception) may be loosely classified under the three heads of work, "culture," and play, previously mentioned.

The acute internal problems of states arise chiefly in connection with the work interest or, more broadly, the economic life. In modern thought this also is conceived in individualistic terms, as co-operation for efficiency in the pursuit of individual ends by the use of means which are either incorporated in the person of the individual or "belong to" him. In fact, of course, the individual is typically the head of a family; the natural family is the minimum possible unit in organized society as a going concern, and the system would more properly be called "familism" than "individualism." (Of necessity the family is largely traditional and authoritarian in structure.) The individualistic or familistic ideal in economic life implies that economic co-operation is worked out primarily through "free" exchange in markets, with its terms fixed by economic competition. (This has no relation to psychological competition, emulation, or rivalry, and strictly economic motivation excudes the latter.) In fact, again, neither the individual nor the family is the typical unit in modern economic life. Production and exchange (purchase and sale for money) are carried on chiefly by organizations which vary in size and internal constitution, but the business corporation is the characteristic form. Like all stable organizations, the productive unit actually has considerable power over those who participate in its activities (as legal members or on contractual terms); and this virtual "sovereignty," as well as that of other associations for economic purposes (labor unions, etc.), is an important source of internal problems in the state.

With respect to these internal problems, the general objective prescribed for the state in modern social-ethical thought is to secure the maximum of individual freedom, including free association. This ideal calls for minimizing the functions of the state itself; for even the freest state acts through law, which is coercive upon a large part of the population. Thus its main internal function is the negative one of "policing" the relations of individuals in direct association and in more permanent voluntary organizations. It is given a monopoly of coercion, chiefly for preventing individuals or groups from coercing others, through either force or fraud. However, liberal thought has always recognized a large range of positive functions for the state, to be determined by expediency, but limited to matters on which there is substantial agreement.

III

Our problem here, however, is not the "internal" problems of states but conflict between states, where, in fact, the immediately serious threat to our civilization arises. But it is of the essence of the matter that no clear separation can be made between internal and external political relations or problems; for within the state conflicts occur between institutional groups, especially families, far more than between literal individuals, and the state itself is merely one form of institution among a vast number. The state is peculiar in two respects. First, the sphere of its power or "sovereignty" is defined by territorial boundaries. (This delimitation is not at all precise, since political allegiance does not coincide with residence, while sovereignty itself is of every degree.) Second, the state has a legal monopoly of military force, including police, within its boundaries—as long as civil war, or the threat of it, is absent.

As we emphasized earlier, human society has two aspects: it is an aggregate of individuals, enjoying more or less freedom, and also a complex of institutional groups. From the standpoint of social science, the

second aspect is the essential reality. The "individual" who makes choices and figures in relations of harmony and conflict is the creation of an intricate complex of institutional groups of every imaginable character and degree of permanence, and he usually acts in the interest of some group. In modern culture the natural family and the state stand out for their relative permanence and functional unity. But we must recognize the role of innumerable other groupings of varying size, degree of stability, and formal organization. These are unified and separated by various common traits or common interests, and their boundaries have little relation to those of states or political jurisdictions. But modern social thought, on its ethical side, takes the opposite view, regarding "society" as an association of free individuals for mutual advantage. Any organization or group, including the state, is viewed as a sort of *ad hoc* affair, made voluntarily and to be remade at will, by any group of individuals to serve any end or purpose which may arise.

In our individualistic ethics, values and ideals exist in the free individual, who is taken as given. The student must recognize that this ideal view is largely contrary to unalterable facts. The ultimate possibilities of freedom are limited. Human nature is a cultural phenomenon, and the individual exists as the bearer of a culture. Viewing man in terms of civilized society, the self-perpetuating biological group plays somewhat the role of the soil which supports a particular species of plant. The nature of the plant is determined chiefly by its inheritance; and the case of man is similar, except that it is a cultural inheritance which is humanly determining rather than a physical germ plasm. The human being does not achieve individuality or freedom, or the idea of freedom, except through a culture made and continued by the various groups in which he lives. His interests and ideals, as well as his capacities, and the external means of life are derived in the main and in most cases from his cultural inheritance. But this inheritance is very different in

different culture situations. In consequence the individual's interests and social and political activities are divided in uncertain and varying proportions between striving to change the various culture complexes in which he finds himself to accord with his desires and ideals and striving to preserve and defend these against the encroachments of others which he feels to be still more alien and repugnant to his spiritual cravings, nurtured by his own group life.

These facts give rise to social conflicts, in the dual form of conflicts between individuals within groups and conflicts between groups differentiated in innumerable ways. The groups in conflict may be states or groups of states, or they may lie within states or cut across state boundaries. The conflicts tend to eventuate in war between nations or alliances or in civil war or class war or simple "crime," as the case may be. Since groups based on economic functions or other common interests, including alliances between states, are indefinitely numerous and shifting, while war practically has to occur between two "sides," the parties must be vague communities of interest which are, in fact, highly heterogeneous.

Under modern conditions, national or world war and class conflict present themselves as alternatives. Political groups tend to strive for internal unity by appealing to, and manufacturing, suspicion and ill will toward other groups. Leaders whip up patriotism by accentuating conflicts of economic interest and the feeling of difference and opposition between cultural ideals vis-à-vis other nations. As everyone knows, modern states, as they have happened to come into being in the course of history, are by no means natural economic units. Economic differences show little correspondence with political boundaries. National interests are not unitary, and between nations as they exist on the map the relations are far more complementary than conflicting. Accordingly, the causality of wars between nations or groups or blocs of nations—the issues about which peoples fight—must be

sought elsewhere than in real conflicts of economic interest. The economic policies of protectionism and autarchy, so characteristic of modern states, are patently antieconomic from the standpoint of the peoples themselves, and colonies are notoriously an economic liability.

National states on the political world map of today do correspond in a general way with major cultural differentiations in the human race as a whole. And every cultural unit which feels itself to be homogeneous and different from others has a "natural" tendency to strive both for its own preservation and for expansion or aggrandizement along numerous lines. These include population numbers, standard of living, culture, and control of territory—all sought as ends, as means to one another as ends, and as sources or symbols of power and "greatness." This endeavor leads inevitably to a competitive situation, which tends to generate antagonism and violence. This will be true even for a group which strives to be progressive without in any way injuring other groups.

This situation gives rise to conflicts of economic interest, in the broad meaning, overriding the mutual advantages of cooperation. All human life requires economic resources, both natural and artificial as usually classified, and the immaterial resources of science and technology. These are necessary for biological and cultural preservation and, additionally, for any form of growth or progress, including intellectual and spiritual culture. Moreover, the effective utilization of resources already possessed requires trade, with or without political control, as a means of access to other resources, physical and human, which are naturally complementary. But it seems to be "human nature" to seek political domination in place of free international trade. Little success has attended the efforts of modern economic teaching to get the general public, even in the most advanced and highly educated countries (specifically our own), to realize effectively and carry over into their political thinking the truism

that in free exchange the advantage is mutual.

This fact is apparent in the protectionist sentiment which is manifested, not merely on the national arena but in our states and smaller communities, against one another. The predominance of mutual advantage over conflicting interests is largely true also of functional economic groups, such as capital and labor, agriculture, industry, and finance, etc. Even individuals, but especially organized groups, tend to take it for granted that in exchange relations the other party dictates the terms in his own favor, through "monopoly" or other unfair advantage—regardless of the extent to which such factors are actually present. This is particularly true when the other party seems to be better off; and there is a real difficulty in that modern ethical thought has not reached any general understanding as to the meaning of justice or fairness in exchange where the parties are unequal in economic status. While we all believe in co-operation, we usually mean that others should co-operate with us, on our terms. This particular animus toward group antagonism and conflict would be greatly reduced if "human nature" were changed, presumably by "education," so that men would carry over into political thought and action principles which they intellectually recognize as axiomatic, such as the mutual advantage to all parties from territorial and functional specialization and exchange. But there would still remain the problem of the one-sided obligation of the economically strong to the weak, or the rights of the latter against the former, which in the nature of the case are not taken into account in market dealings. Or we may think of attempting to remove or reduce inequality in economic capacity.

The two questions—(a) as to the amount of good which economic education might do in eliminating antagonism and strife and (b) as to the possibility of the education itself—must be answered or discussed in the light of still other facts. The first is that,

entirely apart from economic relations, "human nature" is competitive and that men tend to form competitive groups, as well as to enter into individual competition. This is evident in play activities. When civilized people are freest to do what they want to do, they typically enter into some competitive game or participate vicariously as spectators. And games are usually contests between groups—and, incidentally, the contests tend strongly to generate ill will, running into strife and combat. The play interest is connected with a craving of "human nature" for power, victory, and dominance and for the admiration which "human nature" also awards to superiority and power.

The motivation of all human activities is largely the play interest and specifically that of competition, involving both individuals and groups. This is manifest in cultural activities—even religion—as well as politics and also in the reality of economic life. "Real wants" for subsistence or health and comfort for one's self and family and posterity obviously account for a small fraction of the economic activities of civilized men, even in modest circumstances, and these are readily sacrificed to less tangible considerations. The content of the wants for the goods and services for which people strive as producers and consumers is predominantly social, conventional, cultural, and aesthetic; the urge or animus is very largely emulation and rivalry—to "keep up with the Joneses" or to get ahead of them. To this end people will endure much discomfort, including the consumption of costly goods for which they have a positive distaste. It must be understood that the economic interest, as such, is completely nonspecific; it is simply the desire for any end which requires the use of scarce means and so calls for "economy" of means. In one sense or another every interest has an economic aspect, and all human interests, including those of play and culture, find expression in economic activity. We can never say how far economic rivalry is really economic in motivation.

IV

We come finally to the major practical issue—the proposal to “change human nature” so as to reduce conflicts of interest, specifically between political groups, at least to the point where they will not break out in destructive violence. What is pertinent and can be said in brief compass will merely indicate the lines of intelligent discussion and point out the naivety of most of what is said and written about the problem.

Any judgment as to either the desirability or the possibility of such a change must rest on a clear notion of the respects in which the minds or “hearts” or habits of men would have to be different in order to eliminate war. Armed conflict would not occur if either (a) every existing state or other interest group would agree to accept the present situation (the “status quo”) and would put into effect—enforce upon its citizens or subjects or members forever—all internal measures necessary to this end; or (b) all would agree in advance on all changes to be made and would enforce the requisite policies, at least enough would have to agree to enforce their will upon all. The first alternative would mean the abolition of all progress or change in any direction; the second merely calls for general agreement on the issues or on some method for their adjudication. In terms of changing human nature, what would be required is elimination of all interests which give rise to group conflict or of their expression in action. There would be no war if every group would enter into a permanently binding agreement not actively to resent anything which any other group might do and not to do anything which any other group might actively resent. And any single unit, individual, or group can always have peace through the same twofold policy. The democracies could, of course, have avoided war with the totalitarian states by joining in with the aims and projects of the latter for world reorganization. Even this would not neces-

sarily banish war from the world unless some one totalitarian system succeeded in permanently establishing itself and imposing its will from pole to pole.

To universalize the policy of nonresistance—which seems to be seriously proposed by religious pacifists and by some who do not appeal to religious principles—would call for the abandonment by all, or at least the masses, of all rights, including life itself, except love and obedience, left, perhaps, to serve as “opium”; for any active effort to live and to perpetuate itself, on the part of any species, biological group, or individual, involves conflict with others, both of the same and of different species. If humanity were not to be reduced to the level of the nonsocial animals—with the “struggle for existence” in which they actually live—the only alternative way of preventing war is the organization of the whole race into a rigidly regimented society, with reproduction and all other interests and activities “frozen” along lines of custom and caste; it means a society of the nature of the beehive or some absolute authoritarian type. Of course, this might conceivably be universally accepted, passively or even joyfully, but a moral faith in human nature requires belief that men would prefer war.

It is, indeed, possible to imagine a universal “democracy,” in which all issues arising out of conflicts of interests would be settled by a majority vote. Such a world government, representing any momentary nominal majority, would have to possess and employ force sufficient to prevent any minority, based on a regional or functional interest, from asserting its “rights” by force or to prevent such groups from coming into organized existence. Since such a system could not last a month if it existed, we need not speculate as to whether it would be better or worse than a despotism exercised by a limited self-elected and self-perpetuating “party,” with an individual head, a “leader,” chosen in some way. Such a group could not keep power and use it very far

contrary to public opinion and will and "might be" about as democratic in reality as a representative government—with the vital exception that it would repress discussion and more or less make its "will of the people" to its own taste. But the limits of this procedure also are probably rather narrow.

Ultimately, the problem of peace is that of agreement or agreement upon some method of arbitration, such as the majority vote. Agreement, direct or indirect, "may" be rational in any degree. In fact, emotion and tradition and force have always been the main factors controlling opinion. Only within fairly narrow limits is strictly rational agreement possible; for, even if men were so wise and good that each could be trusted to judge his own cause, there is no objective definition of justice. Rights as well as interests conflict and call for compromise, distant consequences are unknown, and ultimate principles do not answer concrete questions. There is not much sense in saying that men "ought" to agree, where no one knows what is right or best. It is surely the height of the immoral to contend that as a general principle men ought to yield right to wrong, or what they seriously believe to be such, either in the face of force or for love, i.e., for the sake of agreement and pleasant personal relations. How far they should yield for the sake of peace is a matter of balancing conflicting values, a matter of judgment. A minority is no more obligated to yield to a majority than the converse is true, except in so far as (a) an overwhelming majority opinion may carry a presumption of greater validity or (b) overwhelming force may make it foolish to fight. Intelligent people have never thought that democracy—and specifically federal democracy—is either a universally possible system or one that will solve all problems. Democratic federalism has never prevailed over component units of widely divergent culture except for very limited functions, chiefly war; and free government has never been able to keep the peace in the face of a serious disagreement between important

sections of the population, requiring enforcement of any law against a large minority which did not believe in that law. On this point it is enough to mention slavery and prohibition in American history.

V

Omitting superfluous comment on the desirability of eventualities which would involve having peace through indifference to all questions of desirability—in effect, the peace of death—we next turn briefly to the scientific question of the possibility of changing human nature. On this point, one constantly meets with the supposed argument that human nature *has changed* in the course of evolution and of history and that "therefore" it *can be changed*. As to the major premise, no one can say whether or not "human nature" has actually changed, in any significant or relevant respect, within a time of which we have any knowledge. The capacity to learn new facts and relationships, to acquire new skills, and to modify emotions is undoubtedly an attribute of normal men. No one can say whether this general trait of human nature has or has not changed, qualitatively or quantitatively, since man crossed the line from the brute to the human.

Whether the vast concrete changes which have certainly occurred through learning in individuals and culture groups constitute change in human nature is a question which is meaningful for us in connection with the major differences and changes in attitudes and capacities in peoples of different cultures. The differences often appear very solid and real. But the inquiring student soon learns that the facts depend on "circumstances" so various and obscure that any general assertion merely shows ignorance or prejudice. We cannot go into the matter of the degree to which culture diversity corresponds with biological, i.e., racial, differences. Students find that the differences between major human groups are chiefly a matter of acquired culture rather than of different racial inheritance; but the facts are not known, and proof is impossible.

If any proposed modification of human nature depends on biological change, the problem of action clearly falls in the field of eugenics or selective breeding; and it would be idle to comment on the possibility or the desirability of employing such measures, by political means, to any considerable extent.

Whatever the facts of change may be, the statement that human nature has changed, even if it is true, proves or implies nothing at all as to the possibility of changing it; this inference is merely absurd. However, human nature, viewed as a culture product, has in fact undoubtedly *been changed*, by deliberate action, in many cases. The scope of "teaching" is far more problematic than that of learning, but its reality will hardly be denied altogether. In this connection substantially everything depends on the personality (the specific human nature) of teacher and pupil and the social relations between them. It may be assumed, also, that some outstanding figures in history, such as authors and poets, religious prophets, and persons in a position of political authority, have at various times exerted some influence on the attitudes and interests of considerable population groups. How far the results were either permanent or intended or desirable is a question to be raised—but not one for us to attempt to answer here.

Our problem is that of the possibility that the persons interested in any particular change in political attitudes favorable to a peaceful world order "can" bring about changes that will lead to the result they wish to effect. About all that can be said about this question is that it is almost infinitely complex and difficult. At its simplest it has to do with the power of those in power—i.e., successful politicians—to mold the public opinion of the states or jurisdictions subject to their authority. Back of this is the question of the "right people" getting into power or "influencing" those who do, or affecting their selection—in competition with the efforts of multitudinous others to exercise influence in conflict-

ing directions. In the immediate background of the present world situation we have seen a demonstration of the power of *dictators* to get into power and to effect substantial changes through education and propaganda, and especially the forcible suppression of similar activities opposed to their own. It will hardly be contended that the changes have been for the better, from the standpoint of international peace and amity. It seems probable, also, that, "human nature being what it is," it is easier for a dictator to effect changes which are bad from this point of view than to effect those which are good—easier, that is, to stimulate the growth of nationalism and group megalomania than to cause change in the opposite direction—and easier to get into power on the basis of the former platform.

However, "we," the parties to the present discussion, do not want a dictatorship on a world scale or for any power or group, including ourselves. We want a world order which is free as well as peaceful. Consequently, what may be thought as to the power of dictators or even of technical majority, to "change human nature" is relevant only in a negative sense to our problem. In a democracy the possibility of progress by deliberate procedure in the direction of enlightenment rests on the hope that the more enlightened individuals finally have more influence, not merely in the pull-and-haul of concrete democratic politics, but back of that in molding public opinion, than have those who are less enlightened. Of course, we must make the prior assumption that individuals and voluntary groups have real power over the course of events in their own lives and that the choice of ends, as well as of means, can be more or less intelligent. If everything is determined by mechanical "forces" or some Cosmic Will, as pictured, respectively, by the scientific world view and by the religion or philosophy of theistic absolutism, there is no "sense" in conduct or in anything else. The possibility of freedom as an ideal depends on the reality of freedom as a metaphysical fact.

VI

The questions raised have the paradoxical character of being so "arguable" that they are rightly described as "unarguable." Further discussion would run into the ultimate issues of philosophy and ethics; and into that speculative region it cannot be carried here. It is not part of the aim of this article to give a solution of the problem of world organization, free from war but without sacrificing essential human values. The writer does not know the solution, if any exists. It is hoped that some contribution has been made to the comprehension of the problem and to its intelligent discussion, which is the first step toward solving it.

However, some constructive suggestions are implied in the argument. A more intelligent judgment of values, beginning with a more objective attitude toward culture differences, should be gradually achievable through education, if it is generally desired. This could reduce that form of patriotism and parochialism which assumes that particular institutions and ideas are ultimately valid and sacred because they are "ours"; that we should only teach other peoples, not

learn from them; and that anything which will benefit an alien group or which it may wish to do in its relations with us must be bad for us and is probably motivated by a wish to injure us. If organized groups appealed to force only on issues rationally judged to be ethically real and important, the change would be a great improvement. Even though they would still occasionally fight, perhaps just as hard or harder, they would surely fight less often. The more accidental and immaterial differences, such as language and religion, should tend to disappear, as well as no longer to arouse antagonism. Groups might also be willing to stop fighting when they were clearly whipped and so avoid much useless destruction and post-war bitterness, which tends to a resumption of the struggle by the beaten side at the first favorable opportunity. When one party is clearly in a hopeless position before a war starts, the peace treaty might be written without the war; this would be a gain even if the treaty itself were no better, but the procedure also seems likely to result in better treaties.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO